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## Understanding the Emerging Fourth Sector and Its Governance Implications

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## Abstract

The fourth sector has traditionally been described as encompassing families, households, neighbours, and friends, however, competing definitions have recently begun to emerge. Three different strands can be observed in the fourth-sector literature. The first strand centres on the notion of one-to-one aid. The second strand centres on self-organizing civic activism. The third strand focuses on hybrid organizations. In this paper we will analyse the main commonalities and differences in the understanding of the fourth sector. Our conclusion is that despite differences, there is enough ‘family resemblance’ between the three different streams of fourth-sector discussion to warrant a synthetic reflection of the governance issues related to this novel phenomenon. As a result of that analysis, we distinguish five specific governance issues that are related to 1) the ability of the public sector to work upon shared values, 2) the empowering nature of self-organizing, 3) the need for new operational rules under the ‘sharing economy’, 4) the transitory but structuration-oriented nature of fourth-sector processes and 5) the notion that fourth-sector involvement does not necessarily improve the quality of participation.

## Introduction

Recent normative theories of governance have emphasised the need for the involvement of actors to be expanded beyond the usual suspects. Edelenbos and Meerkerk (2016: 402), for example, argue that “complex decision making takes place within interdependent sets of actors”, and as a consequence, more interactive governance is needed to enhance the effectiveness, integration and democratic legitimacy of decision making (see also, Rask et al. 2018). While theories of inclusive governance are becoming mainstream (e.g., Renn 2008; Torfing et al. 2016), it is less clear how to identify potential actors and stakeholders in a manner that takes adequate account of the increasing complexity of the socio-political context, and the nature of the actors involved.

Society can be divided structurally into four distinct sectors (see Smith, Stebbins and Dover 2006). The first, the public sector, is traditionally seen as consisting of governmental services, whereas the second, or for-profit sector, consists of privately-run businesses. The third sector is considered the non-profit sector, and the fourth sector a sector containing families and households. In reality, however, the boundaries are not clear (Brandsen, van de Donk and Putters 2005). The definitions of sectors change constantly, particularly with

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regard to the third sector, which seems to embrace an increasing number of actors and activities (see Corry 2010; Salamon and Sokolowski 2016). Given the growth of the literature on the fourth sector, and to avoid the third sector becoming “a residual category” (Corry 2010: 11) where all the actors that do not sit comfortably in the public or private sector groups are lumped together, it is worth looking more closely at the content of that fourth sector.

Recent academic discussion on the fourth sector has taken place in the context of policy science, administrative sciences, sociology, and economics, which have provided different angles on this phenomenon. Policy science and administrative sciences have paid attention to the role of informal volunteerism in the management of public policy issues. In this context, the focus is on understanding the role, potential, and limitations of informal *micro-level one-to-one aid* in complementing public service provisions (e.g., Williams 2002; 2008). Sociologists and social movement researchers have explored the role, potential, and drivers of *self-organizing civic activism* in the new service economy (e.g. Böse, Busch and Sesic 2006; Mäenpää and Faehnle 2017; Raisio et al. 2019). In turn, economists have paid attention to the role of what are termed hybrid organizations and their increasing role as the catalysts of economic performance, but also as game changers of capitalist production logic (Sabeti 2009; Sinuany-Stern and Sherman 2014, Johanson and Vakkuri 2018). Although the different disciplinary traditions have slightly different conceptualisations of the essence of the fourth sector, they all point to an emerging new sector and logic influencing societal and economic activity, and also provide new accounts of its implications for public policy making.

Quite interestingly, in some contexts academic thinking has been incorporated into practical action. The World Economic Forum, for instance, has launched a *Fourth Sector Development Initiative*, which is “a collaboration of public, private, and philanthropic institutions committed to accelerating sustainable, inclusive development by catalysing trillions of dollars of fourth-sector growth globally by 2030” (see World Economic Forum 2017). In Finland, the Advisory Board on Civil Society Policy that operates in conjunction with the Finnish Ministry of Justice, mentions the fourth sector in its action plans for 2017–2021 (KANE 2017). In addition, in 2018 one of the largest political parties in Finland, the Centre Party, included the fourth sector (which it defines as encompassing spontaneous and short-term pop up activity) in descriptions of its key policies for the development of democracy and civil society (Centre Party, 2018). Such self-organizing fourth-sector activity is also strongly reflected in regional programmes and municipal strategy work in Finland.

With the introduction of policies governing the involvement of the fourth sector, and a highly diverse range of academic discussions on the subject, it is pertinent to try to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the nature of this phenomenon. We will therefore ask the following research questions in this paper: a) How is the fourth sector defined in the three main streams of academic discussion (micro-level one-to-one aid, self-organized civic activism, and hybrid organizations) and what are their commonalities and differences? b) What are the key characteristics and driving forces of the fourth sector as an emerging societal phenomenon? c) What are the main governance issues and challenges around fourth-sector involvement?

An enhanced understanding of the nature of the fourth sector can support better involvement strategies and help manage complex networks and interactions. A more synthetic view of the previously separate academic streams of fourth-sector literature can help develop more holistic research agendas that consider complementary perspectives from sociology, policy science, administrative sciences and economics.

This paper is structured as follows. Section 2 examines how the phenomenon of the fourth sector has been conceptualised in different academic discussions. The analysis is based on a literature review in which articles including the term *fourth sector* as the key words were explored in several databases (Web of Science, Scopus, ScienceDirect, Google Scholar). Articles where the fourth sector was considered a societal sector were included in the analysis, while articles where the fourth sector was conceptualised as something else (e.g. as ‘adult and community education’), were excluded. Section 3 analyses the emerging characteristics of the fourth sector by using a general activity theoretical framework as a heuristic tool. The fourth and final section proposes a synthetic definition of the fourth sector and discusses the governance implications.

## What Is Meant by the Fourth Sector?

Three different (main) strands can be observed in the fourth-sector literature (see Jalava et al. 2017). The first strand centres on the notion of *one-to-one aid*. As Williams (2002, 2003, 2008) suggests, the focus of this discussion is about how individuals can, and often do, help their fellow citizens on the basis of *informal volunteering*, typified as a fourth-sector activity, rather than through voluntary groups commonly referred to as part of the third sector. The authors in this stream of research suggest that the role and significance of the fourth sector has not been sufficiently acknowledged, particularly by governments, who unjustifiably favour the third sector when designing community participation strategies (Harju 2003; Williams *ibid.*).

The second strand of the fourth-sector literature centres on *self-organizing civic activism*. Mäenpää and Faehnle (2017: 78), who represent this strand, understand the fourth sector as urban civic activism, which they characterize as an “area of civil society that, with its quick, lightly organised, proactive and activity-centred nature, is structured outside of the third sector, or the field of non-governmental organisations”. That definition highlights a do-it-yourself spirit, a yes-in-my-backyard attitude and the heavy utilization of the internet and social media. Examples are local movements, peer-to-peer trade and services, social peer support, and hacktivism. *Self-organization* is often mentioned as the key feature of the fourth sector, which is in line with Böse, Busch and Sestic’s (2006: 148) characterization of the fourth sector as “a form of social practices in everyday life, which are not and should not be controlled by anyone but the community”.

The third strand focuses on *hybrid organizations*. The fourth sector is perceived in this strand of literature as a product of the hybridization of public, private, and non-profit sector organizations (Sinuany-Stern and Sherman 2014). Sabeti (2009), for example, identified two primary attributes in such

organizations: *a social purpose and a business method* (see also Alessandrini 2010). An organization having a social purpose refers to “a core commitment to social purpose embedded in its organizational structure”; and the business method refers to an organization conducting “any lawful business activity that is consistent with its social purpose and stakeholder responsibilities” (Sabeti 2009: 5). Examples of such organizations include sustainable enterprises, social enterprises, and blended value organizations.

Each of these streams have their own definitions and points of emphasis that can on first glance seem contradictory, as for example in the emphasis on *self-organization* (civic activism) versus *organization* (hybrid organization). Rask et al. (2018: 46) acknowledged the above three strands and attempted to formulate a coherent definition of the fourth sector, concluding that, “[the] fourth sector’ is an emerging field, composed of actors or actor groups whose foundational logic is not in the representation of established interests, but rather, in the idea of social cooperation through hybrid networking”.

Some previous studies have aimed to systematically identify the key characteristic of the fourth sector in some specific sectors (e.g., Jalava et al. 2017, in the context of security and safety domains; Sabeti 2009, in the context of hybrid organizations). Nevertheless, to date no study has engaged in a broader literature review that analyses, compares and builds a synthesis of the understanding of the fourth sector in different academic discussions, which is the main objective and contribution of this paper. In the following sub-sections 2.1–2.3, we will therefore first provide a synthesis on the discussions in the three strands of research just described, followed by a review of some residual studies in sub-section 2.4.

### Micro-Level One-To-One Aid

As part of the predominantly British research stream in volunteerism, the fourth sector is most often understood as synonymous with micro-level one-to-one aid (e.g. Williams 2002, 2004a, 2004b, 2008, 2009). This informal micro-level one-to-one aid is then contrasted with the more formal, organization based, third-sector approach (ibid; cf. Wilson 2012: 177; see also Rochester 2006; Rask et al. 2018: 46). The third sector is traditionally defined as something between the public and private sectors, consisting of formal organizations established on a voluntary basis to pursue social and community goals (Corry 2010; Williams 2004b, 2009). The fourth sector should then encompass informal community participation and activity; the micro-level one-to-one acts between individuals that have no formal organization (Williams 2004a: 730; see also Shachar, von Essen and Hustinx 2019).

The often-cited definition for volunteering refers to “any activity in which time is given freely to benefit another person, group or organisation” (Wilson 2000: 215; also, Stukas et al. 2015; Whittaker et al. 2015). One-to-one aid could hence be understood as a form of volunteering, where an activity is focused on benefiting or aiding another person. It has been debated whether one-to-one aid should be understood as helping one’s immediate family or kin (Corry 2010; cf. Williams 2004b, 2009) or if it only refers to activities directed to households other than one’s own, such as friends, neighbours, acquaintances, or even persons previously unknown to the helper (Williams 2004b, 2009). Williams

(2004b: 31) differentiates one-to-one aid from unpaid domestic work provided by household members for themselves or for other members of their household. One-to-one aid also differs from *community self-help*, which has an institutional character, while still being independent of the state, self-governing, and involving the volunteering element (ibid). Community self-help would therefore be closer to the traditional understanding of volunteering as a third-sector activity than an element of the emerging definition of fourth-sector activity. It also resembles the definitions of self-organizing civic activism, a topic covered in the following sub-section.

The social psychological roots of one-to-one aid stem from the study of prosocial behaviour, which has been said to be an antecedent of volunteering (Stukas et al. 2015; Dovidio et al. 2010; also, Wolensky 1979). Prosocial behaviour in general is described as any activity “beneficial to other people and the ongoing political system” (Dovidio et al. 2010: 21). Penner et al. (2005: 375) also state that volunteering “involves prosocial action in an organizational context, which is planned and continues for an extended period”.

Snyder and Omoto (2008: 2-3) distinguish six characteristics of volunteering: 1) the actions must be voluntary, performed of the actor’s free will, without bonds of obligation or coercion, 2) the acts of volunteering involve deliberation and decision making, they are not acts of assistance or ‘emergency helping’, 3) volunteer activities must be delivered over a period of time, 4) the decision to volunteer must be based entirely on the person’s own goals without expectation of reward or punishment, 5) volunteering involves serving people or causes who desire help, and 6) volunteerism is performed on behalf of people or causes, commonly through agencies or organizations. The core idea is that volunteering is differentiated from informal neighbourliness or ad-hoc emergency helping. Volunteering is formal, extends over long periods of time and involves deliberate decision making to volunteer to support a given cause (See also, Wilson 2000, 2012). This definition of volunteering contrasts with some of the core ideas of the fourth sector and one-to-one aid.

One-to-one aid does not necessarily happen over an extended time period, it may be an ad-hoc emergency helping event, or a one-time act of neighbourly help. It is not based on agencies or organizations but is emergent and self-organizing (Rask et al. 2018; Williams 2002, 2004a, 2004b, 2009). Currently, it seems that the essence of the fourth sector does not fulfil the criteria of volunteering, yet it is treated as a new form of volunteering. If volunteerism is restricted to activities only undertaken through formal organizations, the term will exclude an enormous amount of work done by people outside formal non-governmental organizations (e.g., Whittaker et al. 2015). Imposing such parameters would also fail to acknowledge the rise of episodic volunteering. *Episodic volunteering* resembles the notions of one-to-one aid and fourth-sector activity in general and is recognized as a new wave of volunteering. People volunteer for only a short time, for a one-time cause, and then move on. They do not become part of formal organizations or agencies, they never enlist in anything, but act upon their perceptions that other people need help (Snyder & Omoto 2008; Stukas 2015; Whittaker et al. 2015; Wilson 2000). The term *spontaneous volunteering* has also been used to describe this kind of action

(Harris et al. 2017). The differences between traditional volunteering and one-to-one aid are summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1.** *A comparison of the characteristics of traditional volunteering and one-to-one aid*

	Traditional volunteering	One-to-one aid (as fourth-sector activity)
Organization	Organized through formal agencies or organizations	Emergent, self-organizing, no formal organization, spontaneous
Time span	Long periods of time	One-time acts, episodic, ad hoc
Motivational basis	Prosocial behaviour, no explicit expectation of reward	Prosocial behaviour, no explicit expectation of reward
Aim	To benefit and serve people and causes that desire help	Community participation, to serve those in immediate need of help and aid
Form of activity	Organized activities to benefit those desiring help	Emergency helping, neighbourly help, does not require an explicit ‘desire’ to be helped by the receiver
Governance implications	Acknowledged as part of the social organization of societies, a sector in itself, often at least partly controlled by the authorities, predictable	Often not acknowledged as part of the social organization of societies, informal, outside the control of authorities, unpredictable and emergent

Micro-level one-to-one aid, or fourth-sector activity, is a specific form of the social organization of society, and as such is one that is accompanied by issues of governance. Nevertheless, those governance implications have often been neglected by policy-makers and government agencies (Williams 2002, 2004a, 2004b, 2008, 2009; see also Harris et al. 2017; Whittaker et al. 2015). It is far simpler to integrate the formal, third-sector type of volunteering into official government programmes and policies than to actively promote one-to-one aid, spontaneous volunteering, or the as yet largely undefined concept of the fourth sector. Governments and agencies tend to want to control volunteer efforts and this does not fit well with the emergent, self-organizing nature of micro-level one-to-one aid. The reason behind the need to control may be purely pragmatic, since fostering, or governing, formal voluntary groups or organizations is relatively straightforward (ibid.), compared to the self-governing and emergent fourth sector. Nevertheless, the fourth sector seems to be taking a larger role alongside traditional formal volunteering.

2.2 Self-organizing civic activism

In Finland, the understanding of the fourth sector differs from the definitions given in sub-sections 2.1 and 2.3. In the Finnish context, the fourth sector is increasingly understood to equate to *urban civic activism*. Mäenpää and Faehnle (2017: 78) define the activity in question as follows: “By the fourth sector, we

refer to the area of civil society that, with its quick, lightly organised, proactive and activity-centred nature, is structured outside of the third sector, or the field of non-governmental organisations” (see also Aaltola and Juntunen 2018; Raisio et al. 2019; Heino, Kalalahti and Jukarainen 2019). This definition highlights a do-it-yourself spirit, a yes-in-my-backyard attitude, and the heavy utilization of the internet and social media (see Table 2). Digitalization is seen as one of the key reasons for the rise of fourth-sector activity (Mäenpää, Faehnle and Schulman 2017). Today, technology enables continuous, real-time, and place-independent communication, which manifests, for example, in social media groups emerging around topical issues. As Faehnle et al. (2017) state, “through digitalization, citizens are now better empowered than ever to take developments into their own hands”. Mäenpää and Faehnle’s *Urban Civic Activism as a Resource research project*, (2017: 79) offers the following examples of fourth-sector activity:

- Sharing/platform/peer-to-peer/citizen economy services
- Community activism, or activism that emphasizes community, mutual help, or the environment
- Space-related activism, or modifying spaces for short-term or long-term use, directly or through planning
- Digital activism or activism that develops the use of information technology
- Activism support, or activism that supports other forms of activism

The above Finnish interpretation of the content of the fourth sector is supported to some extent by Böse, Busch and Sestic (2006). Böse et al. were the first researchers to link the concept of the fourth sector to self-organized civic activism. Their research on the cultural sphere in Vienna and Belgrade highlighted cultural practices emancipated from the activities of the third sector and located outside the commercial and governmental realms. For Böse, Busch and Sestic (ibid.) such fourth-sector cultural practices are characterized by their transitory, subversive, and fluid nature. These practices have a strong project-character, a counter-hegemonic position, and a dynamic nodal structure. One of the main differences between the definition of the Finnish fourth sector (Mäenpää, Faehnle and Schulman 2017) and the definition of Böse, Busch and Sestic (ibid.) is thus that while the former emphasizes the constructive nature of the fourth sector, in the latter the subversive aspect of the activity is highlighted. In addition, Böse, Busch and Sestic (ibid. 149) went on to underline how the fourth sector consists particularly of “people [e.g. migrant and refugee populations] who are excluded from the first and third sector, and who do not have much opportunity to participate in the consumer culture offered by the second sector, therefore having to find a way of self-organization”.

It is also important to be aware of existing research on self-organizing civic activism that is not explicitly linked to the concept of the fourth sector. Polanska provides a good example of such research. In her study of informal Polish social and urban activism, she argues that local level self-organized activism, which is characterized by spontaneity, flexibility, anti-institutional orientation and community building, is definitely flourishing (see Polanska and Chimiak 2016;



Polanska 2018). Both Polanska (2018: 6) and Mäenpää, Faehnle and Schulman (2017: 254) have tried to identify differences between formal and informal civic society practices (see Table 2). Again, the differences relate to the constructive versus the subversive nature of fourth-sector practices emerges. Moreover, Mäenpää, Faehnle and Schulman (2017) emphasize the role of social media more explicitly. It should additionally be noted that the Finnish understanding of the fourth sector bears clear similarities with the Danish concept of the *everyday maker* that includes the following features: do it yourself; do it where you are; do it for fun but also because you find it necessary; do it ad hoc or part time; do it concretely (rather than ideologically); do it responsibly and show trust in yourself; and do it by looking at expertise as an other rather than as the enemy (Bang and Sørensen 1999: 336–337).

**Table 2.** Differences between the formal (NGOs) and informal (fourth sector) civic society practices.

Comparison of ideal types of civic society practices (Mäenpää, Faehnle & Schulman, 2017: 254)		Binary oppositions associated with formal and informal organizations (Polanska, 2018: 6)	
Traditional NGOs	Fourth-sector type practices	Formal	Informal
Organization: NGO	Organization: e.g. only social media group	Hierarchical	Horizontal
Social media as an aid	Social media essential	Rules	Norms
Impact through influencing preparation and decision making	Hacker attitude to influence	Bureaucracy	Pleasure
Influence (formal)	Events, activities, DIY	Dependence	Independence
Municipality as a partner	Community	Constraining	Liberating
Representativeness	Networking, companies	Conformity	Challenging and opposing
Continuity	Openness, sharing	Instrumental	Ideational
Advocacy	Visibility	Structure	Interpersonal relationships
Controlled overall development	Short duration	Responsibility	Creativity
Hierarchical	Avoiding hierarchies		
Let's do as before	Passion for action, innovating		
Resistance, NIMBY	Proactivity, YIMBY		

Despite minor differences, the above presented perspectives have a core connecting factor in the form of *self-organization*. While Böse, Busch and Sestic

(2006) and Polanska (2018) write about self-organization on a more general level, Rantanen and Faehnle (2017) connect it explicitly to the *complexity science framework* (see also Raisio et al. 2019). Complexity scientist Eve Mitleton-Kelly (2003: 43) has described self-organization as “the spontaneous coming together of a group to perform a task (or for some other purpose); the group decides what to do, how and when to do it; and no one outside the group directs those activities”. During the process of self-organization “novel and coherent structures, patterns and properties” arise (Goldstein 1999: 49). More specifically, in the context of urban development, Boonstra and Boelens (2011: 113) offer the following definition of self-organization: “initiatives that originate in civil society from autonomous community-based networks of citizens, who are part of the urban system but independent of government procedures” (see also Fuchs 2006; Uitermark 2015).

Various positive aspects of self-organization, in relation to fourth-sector practices, have been offered in the literature. Among the foremost is the fourth sector’s adaptability and agility. Self-organizing civic activism is based on improvisation and creativity, often making fourth-sector actors capable of acting more flexibly, unconventionally, and quickly than actors in other sectors, whose actions are limited by various rules and regulations (Mäenpää and Faehnle 2017; Polanska 2018). Accordingly, the fourth sector could improve the resilience of cities to sudden changes in circumstances and support public authorities addressing them (see Mäenpää, Faehnle and Schulman 2017). In addition, because fourth-sector practices often bring together like-minded people, for many being involved can be an enabling, motivating, and empowering experience. Acting together in a rather symmetrical manner might well encourage creativity, friendship, diversity, and enthusiasm. In addition, owing to their having a certain elasticity, fourth-sector practices may be an attractive way of contributing for busy modern people who cannot engage in activities for a prolonged period (Polanska 2018). This elasticity could well mean that—counter to its anti-institutional orientation—the emergent activities of the fourth sector eventually lead to the establishment of actual third-sector organizations or business entities (Mäenpää, Faehnle and Schulman 2017).

Nevertheless, self-organization can also provide a cover for malign activity and processes (see Uitermark 2015), and Bella (2006) uses the concept of the *emergence of evil* to describe such developments. In raising this darker side of self-organization and emergence, Bella, King and Kailin (2003: 68) refer to “dark outcomes [which] emerge from interactions among well-intended, hardworking, competent individuals”. Such outcomes are not unknown to the fourth sector, and there can for example be friction and even conflicts between fourth-sector actors and traditional NGOs. In addition, self-organization can provide a platform for groups such as the Finnish *Soldiers of Odin* citizen watch movement, which is generally perceived in a negative way (see Mäenpää, Faehnle and Schulman 2017; Raisio et al. 2019). It is perhaps inevitable that because fourth-sector activism is often emotionally driven, activists can be steered in both benign and malign directions; as noted by Böse, Busch and Sesic (2006: 148) fourth-sector practices can “easily be directed towards nationalism and hatred, similar to ‘football fan scenes’”. One of the greatest risks is that if self-organization is unevenly realized it will increase social inequality (see

Mäenpää, Faehnle and Schulman 2017). For instance, Polanska and Chimiak (2016: 672) point out how elitist tendencies of social activism and the creation of exclusive enclaves (i.e. an *intelligentsia ethos*) may come to “prevent individuals lacking cultural capital from joining the initiative”; thus, in a Putnamian sense bonding over bridging social capital arises. A key factor will be how self-organisation is distributed across countries, cities, and neighbourhoods (Uitermark 2015). Uitermark (2015: 2304) summarizes the above-described darker side of self-organization as follows:

*At the same time, the government’s idealization of citizens and the boasting about civic power raises suspicions. It is narcissistic to only see the power and beauty of civil society. The idealization of citizens – by governments and occasionally by citizens themselves – betrays a lack of real curiosity and true commitment as it is blind to self-organisation’s weaknesses and darker side.... Just as the state can fail, so can the market, and so can civil society.*

## Hybrid Organizations

The discussion on hybrid organizations dates back to the 1970s. The long history of this discussion has given rise to hundreds, if not thousands, of academic articles on the subject, ranging from the fields of economics and organizational sciences to social and political studies (e.g. Kickert 2001; Johanson and Vakkuri 2018). However, discussions explicitly equating hybrid organizations with the concept of the fourth sector are still few. An important stimulus for such writings has been the Fourth Sector Network (FSN) that was founded in 1998 to provide an environment for the development of fourth-sector enterprises and the infrastructure that supports them. Sabeti’s report *The Emerging Fourth Sector* (2009) is among the key publications of the FSN, and while the number of articles explicitly stating that hybrid organizations form the fourth sector is low, there is a broadly shared understanding of the nature of this phenomenon among those articles. Descriptions of hybrid organizations generally refer to the amalgam of for-profit and non-profit organizations (Kickert 2001; Johanson and Vakkuri 2018). As Sinuany-Stern and Sherman (2014: 3) put it, “[the] hybrid sector dedicates resources to deliver social benefits using business methods to optimize their social benefit”.

Different labels have been used to denote hybrid organizations that follow sustainability-driven business models (see, Rubio-Mozos et al. 2019). Such labels include, social enterprise (McNeill and Silseth 2015), low-profit limited liability company (or L3C), blended value, for-benefit, values driven, mission driven, and benefit corporation (B-corporation) (Hoffman, Badiane and Haigh 2012). While employing market tactics to address social and environmental issues, hybrid organizations also address corporate social responsibility, non-profit management, social entrepreneurship, and inclusive business (i.e., the base of the pyramid) (Ogliastri et al. 2015), cause-related marketing, socially responsible investing, corporate philanthropy, and social marketing (Avidar 2017), as well as ethical trading, microfinance, social venture capital, community development, and public private partnerships (McNeill and Silseth 2015).

For business practitioners, hybrid organizations challenge traditional ideas of the role and purpose of the firm, as well as what it means to be a sustainable business. For academics, hybrids challenge the standard classifications used to categorize public and private organizations, and ways of understanding their objectives and functions. (Haigh and Hoffman 2012; Johanson and Vakkuri 2018.) In order to distinguish hybrids from traditional organizations, Haigh and Hoffman (2012) analyse the differences in their missions, relationships with suppliers, employers, and customers, as well as in the focus of industrial activities (see Table 3). Johanson and Vakkuri (2018: 3–4), in contrast use more governance-oriented modelling in stating that the notion of hybridity can be considered to cover the following: mixed ownership, goal incongruence and competing institutional logics, a multiplicity of funding arrangements, and public and private (for- or non-profit) forms of financial and social control.

**Table 3.** *Key distinguishing factors between traditional and (fourth sector) hybrid Organisations (Haigh & Hoffman, 2012)*

Traditional organisations	Hybrid organisations (fourth sector)
Social and environmental missions as secondary goals	Social and environmental missions as primary goals
Relationships with suppliers, employers, and customers primarily functional and transactional	Relationships with suppliers, employers, and customers based on mutual benefits and sustainability outcomes
Industry activity focused on creating markets for traditional goods and services, and altering industry standards for self-serving benefit	Industry activity focused on creating markets for hybrid goods and services, and altering industry standards to serve both the company and the condition of the social and environmental contexts

The key distinction is that hybrids do not self-evidently prioritize profit-making, but social and environmental missions. The idea is to create shared value for suppliers, employers, customers, and ultimately, value for the whole society (Porter and Kramer 2011; Gidron 2017). Another way to contrast hybrids and traditional organizations is through the concept of externalities. Dyck and Silvestre (2018) report that while traditional organizations enhance their financial interests by reducing their negative socio-ecological externalities, hybrids enhance positive socio-ecological externalities while remaining financially viable (i.e., through their not having to maximize financial returns). They call the latter approach the double bottom line, which reflects enhancing social and ecological well-being being considered more important than enhancing financial well-being (see also Kurucz et al. 2014). In the analysis of Gidron (2017: 2), the hybridity of fourth-sector organizations spans aspects ranging from *the form* (i.e., business models blending profit-making with non-profit mission orientation) to *the substance* that has to do with the content and the organizational processes of the social enterprise's activity: the modes of personnel management, the outcomes of such entities creating social and business value simultaneously and the methods for measuring those outcomes.

The current understanding of hybrid organizations as an instance of the fourth sector differs in at least two respects from the earlier analysis of hybrid organizations discussed in organizational science literature. First, hybrids were originally understood just as a new type of governance structure, struggling with the well-known trade-off between markets and hierarchies. Second, hybrids were considered to be formed of partners, who remain “independent residual claimants with full capacity to make autonomous decisions as a last resort” (Ménard 2004: 353). If rivalry between different partners – be it in clusters, networks, symbiotic arrangements, supply-chain systems, administered channels, or nonstandard contracts, et cetera – was among the key concerns of past studies, the current focus has shifted to analysing hybrid organizations as a new organizational entity, the endurance of whose business model is being tested. Can altruistic companies really survive in the market? Hybrids, under the current interpretation, seek to grow like any business actor, not simply for their own benefit but also for the benefit of other firms in associated markets. In other words, rather than seeking to “make their core competency opaque and their value-adding capabilities inimitable (Barney, 1991), hybrids value transparency and use of an open source model that others can follow” (Hoffman, Badiane and Haigh 2012: 141).

The number of hybrid organizations has increased substantially in recent years, to a degree that legislators in many countries have had to adapt regulations to acknowledge the particular nature of such companies. Hybrid organizations are underpinned by a new and growing demographic of individuals who place a higher value on healthy living, environmental and social justice, and ecological sustainability in terms of the products and services they purchase. This demographic is recognized with labels such as Cultural Creatives and LOHAS or Lifestyles of Health and Sustainability (Haigh and Hoffman 2012: 126). The success of hybrid organizations has also been explained through failures of the state and the market within the context of advanced global capitalism (McNeill and Silseth 2015; Defourny and Nyssens 2010; Pearce 2003; Williams 2007). *State failure explanations*, as emphasized in the U.S., suggest that where the state cannot or will not provide adequate social services in efficient ways, social entrepreneurship emerges in response. *Market failure explanations* that prevail in the European context, explain the emergence of hybrids as a response to the lack of a market presence in some areas.

In addition to changing demographics and state and market theories, there is a broad consensus that traditional business models are no longer adequate to address the social and environmental issues of our day (Rubio-Mozos et al. 2019; Draper 2005; Alexander 2000). Hybrid organizations can therefore provide a viable alternative employing market tactics to address social and environmental issues. That model is, however, not without its challenges.

In the literature on hybrid organizations, one of the main governance issues is how to understand and clearly identify such hybrids (e.g. Johanson & Vakkuri 2018). Hybrid organizations are altruistically oriented entities, but have also adopted pragmatic, efficient, and business-like modes of operation that are often classified under the mantle of neoliberalism, new managerialism, and third-way ideologies, and in so doing, they have become increasingly blended in their functions and organizational forms (McNeill and Silseth 2015). A related

concern is that employer-employee relationships, especially inside social businesses, can exploit weak populations by keeping remuneration levels for their work very low (Avidar 2017).

## 2.4 Other Discussions on the Fourth Sector

In addition to the three academic streams summarized above, we observed two additional discussions introducing the notion of the fourth sector, with slightly different meanings. One such discussion relates to the special nature of so-called *zakat organizations* (Santoso 2017). Another is about the nature of participatory innovation in the context of research and innovation (Rask et al. 2018).

*Zakat* is a form of alms-giving treated in Islam as a religious obligation or tax. Zakat organizations manage funds by collecting such taxes and sharing them among poorer sections of society. With regard to the nature of zakat organizations, Santoso (2017: 195) has argued that "...the basic value of zakat management organization is very different from 3 (three) other sectors. Therefore, the organizational form of zakat management is not part of the three, it is the fourth-sector organization, the zakat organization" (see also, Riyadi and Santoso 2018). Unlike Santoso (ibid.), who considers the faith-based organization of zakat particular enough to form the fourth sector, we prefer to follow Sabeti (2009), who classified faith-based enterprises as one instance of the broader category of hybrid organizations.

In their analysis of an international sample of innovative research and innovation governance processes, Rask et al. (2018) directed attention to the high number of non-conventional policy actors such as activists, hobbyists, ethnic minority groups, handicapped people, young offenders, patients, passers-by, consumers, festival guests, or randomly selected participants in citizen assemblies. Since these actors often appear in an ephemeral fashion, without permanent structure of the public, private or third-sector organizations, they were grouped together as the fourth sector. Furthermore, Rask et al. (ibid.) referred to the particular *nature of expertise* among these groups (e.g., activists and hobbyists were characterized as *field experts*, patients and young offenders as *life world experts*) as well as to the particular *nature of political representation* of these groups (e.g., passers-by and randomly selected people do not represent any particular societal interest unlike public, private and third-sector organizations). Lack of space here means we can only observe that expertise does not seem to be a very good distinction for determining the fourth sector, since various types of experts can currently populate any type of organization and social sector. The mixed nature of political or interest representation, however, seems more closely related to other discussions on the fourth sector.

## The Emerging Characteristics of the Fourth Sector

The fourth sector is a topical phenomenon. It is notable how different are the framings of the fourth sector, whether in terms of self-organized versus organized activity, the issue of economy versus democracy, or in terms of the competing demarcation criteria distinguishing the fourth sector from other sectors, including self-organization, informality, spontaneity, and combination of

market and mission approaches, and so forth. In light of this variety, it is relevant to ask whether there is actually any common denominator underlying the differences.

Despite the discrepancies, in our view there are also commonalities that may justify proposing criteria that characterize all interpretations of the fourth sector, as summarized above. Using a general activity theoretical framework as a heuristic tool (Engeström 2001) focusing attention on the *actors*, *tools*, *objectives*, and *outcomes* of any form of activity, we propose the following four criteria for the definition of the fourth sector:

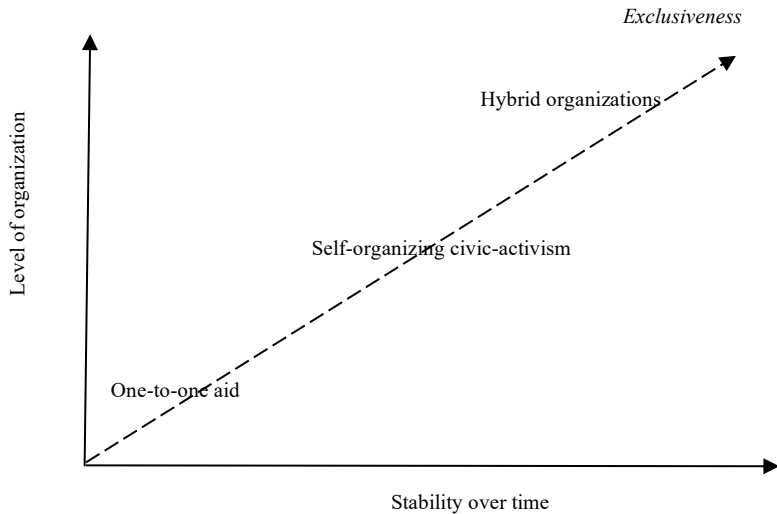
- **Actors:** Involvement in the fourth sector is based on non-representational participation. This is particularly true in the case of one-to-one help and self-organized civic activism. As for hybrid organizations, this criterion can be less clear, but at least members of any hybrid organization do not represent any particular interest or interest group (such as a business- or an environmentally-oriented one), instead they refer to multiple societal values that are typically blended.
- **Tools:** Fourth-sector activity favours the open application of co-creation. It is common for fourth-sector processes to be based on the sharing economy and provision of platforms that allow anyone to take part or develop their own activities using tools provided by others. In the case of hybrid organizations, this philosophy is pushed to the level where the opening of the business model can even endanger the economic vitality of the fourth-sector organizations.
- **Objectives:** Fourth-sector processes always call for the activity to have prosocial and non-profit based aims. As the cases of civic activism and hybrid organizations indicate, however, this does not necessarily exclude parallel market orientation, particularly in the selection of strategies and tactics.
- **Outcomes:** Fourth-sector activity does not result in a formalized institution; but will result in an adaptive actor or organization that constantly seeks new responses to the changing conditions of the context. Self-organized civic activism will always find its expression in ad-hoc type solutions that match particular places and their requests for effective action. Hybrid organizations will need to continuously redefine their missions along the way to accomplish their goals.

In addition to illuminating common features that can be found in the different strands of fourth-sector analysis reviewed in this paper, the four criteria also help to contrast the fourth sector with the other three sectors of society. With regard to the non-representational nature of participation, it is clear that state, business, and third-sector organizations do represent the established interests of society. With regard to the open application of co-creation, this certainly is not a unique property of the fourth sector, but business interests, protection of intellectual property rights (IPR), and requests for effective action (e.g., Greenpeace launching a media campaign) often limit the revelation and open sharing of the instruments applied in the operations of the three other

sectors. As for the prosocial and non-profit based aims, the contrast is primarily with the business sector, but along the prosocial orientation also against operation favouring any particular interest group only, which is frequently the case with the operation of third-sector organizations (e.g., not-in-my-backyard or NIMBY syndrome). As for the tendency to remain adaptive rather than formalized, this can best be contrasted with the actions of state and business actors, but also to some extent against those of NGOs, who have to comply with several regulatory norms that require clear definition of the rules of activity and related responsibilities.

Nevertheless, we acknowledge that the three different forms of the fourth sector described in the previous sections differ in their level of organization and also in regard to their stability over time (see Figure 1). One-to-one aid is the most informal, since it is not based on formal organizations or agencies, and is usually short lived, including local, one-time acts of aid and help between individuals. Self-organizing civic activism has at least an informal group-type organization, that is, some form of (self-) coordinated action of a group of individuals, and happens over an extended period of time, which may vary greatly depending on the context. Hybrid organizations by definition have an organizational form, which is usually stable over longer timespans.

*Figure 1. Different forms of the fourth sector and their characteristics*



Addressing how the levels of organization and stability impact the dynamics of involvement in fourth-sector activities, we hypothesize that the *exclusiveness* of the activity will increase alongside the increasing stability and organization of the activity, which is clearly evident in the case of one-to-one help, which seems to be the most inclusive form of aid-giving (Williams 2004a, 2004b, 2008, 2009). We will discuss the governance implications of this hypothesis below.



## Discussion

One salient feature in the analysis of the fourth sector is its prevalently positive tone. Positive bias is perhaps most pronounced in the studies of self-organizing civic activism that often describe it as expressing a new type of societal creativity, and also as displaying positive energy and a proactive orientation. A similar bias can also be found in studies of hybrid organizations that generally pay more attention to social benefits than to potential costs, thus reflecting the title of Hoffman's et al. (2012) article *Hybrid Organizations as Agents of Positive Social Change: Bridging the For-Profit and Non-Profit Divide*. The positive depiction can be explained through the prosocial, volunteer, and non-profit-based orientations that are typical of the fourth sector. Who would not welcome freely offered, often generous support from others?

While the fourth sector has often acted as a catalyst for positive social change, a prudent approach to fourth-sector involvement should adopt a broader, and at the same time, more balanced view of its activities. Such a view can be built upon the four criteria and the following synthetic definition: the fourth sector should be seen as a special type of activity that is characterized by non-representational participation, use of open co-creation approaches that are combined with a prosocial, non-profit orientation and adaptive, context-sensitive strategies. Such activity will often involve obvious benefits, such as new remedies for certain types of market and state failures (see above) and increasing resilience, but it has its shortcomings too.

With reference to the governance issues emerging from our analysis, the first question to address is how to understand the scope and content of the fourth sector. Our literature survey highlights the diversity of the concept. The differences are most pronounced between the perspectives of self-organized civic activism and hybrid organizations. Assuming the differences are real, it can sometimes be more advisable to keep the different streams separate, and prepare separate strategies for one-to-one help, self-organized activism, and hybrid organizations, rather than to aim to have one unifying approach.

Despite differences, however, we perceived enough familial resemblance (i.e. shared but not singly necessary and jointly sufficient properties; see about this Wittgensteinian concept, e.g. Medin et al. 1987) between the three different streams of fourth-sector discussion, to warrant a synthetic reflection of the governance issues related to this novel phenomenon. Regarding the fourth sector from a broader and more systematic perspective may offer certain benefits, in that it allows learning and reflection across different strands of activity, and it may help to view the fourth sector as a specific sector and approach that involves very different dynamics from the other three sectors. Building on this observation, below we have identified five critical governance issues that should help policy-makers prepare effective strategies to govern fourth-sector involvement:

- ISSUE#1 It is about shared values and visions, not about political representation! The non-representative nature of the actors involved in fourth-sector processes provides new opportunities to overcome situations paralysing planning or decision making. Since the motivation

of the fourth-sector actors is deeply related to the societal missions and visions of the participants, to collaborate effectively, any government should be able to understand and be interested in understanding and working on shared values.

- **ISSUE#2** Less organization can be emancipatory! Even though the fourth sector, almost by definition, calls for people to participate beyond established structures and channels of participation, they are not politically neutral. Rather, there are different motivations for involvement evident in different types of fourth-sector activity. Self-organized civic activism tends to emerge in more economically advantaged neighbourhoods, whereas one-to-one aid seems to be the most inclusive form of any volunteering, since it does not require any previous experience, special skills, or training; thus empowering the marginalized or deprived parts of society (Williams 2004a, 2004b, 2008; Polanska and Chimiak 2016). However, it should also be noted that in situations where certain segments of society (e.g. migrants and refugee populations) are excluded from the other societal sectors, fourth-sector activity, in the form of civic activism, can form an empowering way of self-organization. Self-organizing civic activism can then construct both elitist enclaves and empowering enclaves for the marginalized (e.g. Böse, Busch and Sestic 2006).
- **ISSUE#3** The sharing economy requires new rules of operation! The open application of co-creation is leading towards a new way of thinking about the nature of businesses, social cooperation, and policy making. A sharing economy can thus extend the resource basis but also challenge traditional ways of making transactions. A minimum request for the fourth sector to operate effectively is a regulation that allows mission and value-based operations in parallel with profit-making. Tensions can emerge from the differences around the treatment of IPR and business models found in the other three sectors.
- **ISSUE#4** Fourth-sector processes are transitory and tend to follow a project cycle! The fourth sector both emerges from and stimulates the activities of the other three sectors. Fourth-sector processes typically emerge from a socio-political context that encourages individuals to develop ideas and solutions in collaboration with their fellow citizens. As illustrated in Figure 1, the fourth sector involves different levels of organization (see also, Rask et al. 2018). Both anticipation of the project cycle and the identification of the interfaces between the other three sectors can provide policy-makers with tools to align fourth-sector activity with that of the other sectors.
- **ISSUE#5** Fourth-sector participation does not automatically lead to better participation! One issue in volunteering research that is also relevant to the fourth sector is the possible antisocial nature of volunteering or fourth-sector type activities (e.g. Stukas et al. 2015; Jalava et al. 2017). Highly motivated volunteers, a focus on societal challenges, and the flexible adaptation to a new context not only provide effective solutions to societal issues but can also foment a

culture of subversion and subordination. The activities themselves might also be antisocial in the sense that the activation of one part of the society can suppress the rights of another social group. Therefore, it is of utmost importance for policy-makers to identify and anticipate not only societal benefits but also threats, such as those related to equity and the protection of the right and opportunity to participate on an equal footing for all citizens.

## Future Research Needs

This paper reviews the literature on the fourth sector in three different streams of academic study. As a result of acknowledging the key insights emerging from different streams, it proposes key criteria and a synthetic definition of the fourth sector. We will end this paper by proposing three avenues for future research that might advance comprehension of the emerging potential and governance challenges related to this phenomenon.

Earlier research on hybrid organizations identified two types of explanations for the emergence of the fourth sector: the market failure emphasized by European scholars and the state failure emphasized by U.S. researchers. Acknowledging that these models emerge from the study of hybrid organizations, it would be interesting to conduct comparative research on the forms of self-organizing civic activism and one-to-one help to determine whether they follow a similar tendency, which might potentially be explained through the different welfare models of these countries.

Further study should scrutinize the proposed criteria to evaluate whether they really help capture the essence of the fourth sector and delineate processes that belong to this sector, or alternatively should be excluded from it. In addition, research should continue to scrutinize the three main streams of fourth-sector activity. For example, is there a danger that when categorizing hybrid organizations as belonging to the fourth sector, we actually take away their hybridity, that is, the essence of blending different sectors together?

Finally, strategies of fourth-sector involvement seem a partially paradoxical exercise, since it is very much the nature of the fourth sector that it will remain an unorganized form of activity. As our study suggests, however, that the fourth sector encompasses different levels of organization and stability, it becomes important to understand the potential stages and interfaces where more formal sectors might affiliate with the operations of the fourth sector.

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